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ABSTRACT

A discussion of Nigeria's national language policy looks at the official structure for language instruction, its rationale, and perceived problems and possibilities. The policy requires that the mother tongue or language of the immediate community be the medium of instruction at pre-primary and early primary levels, with English emerging as medium of instruction halfway through primary education. At the secondary level, English remains the medium of instruction, but each child must also learn one of three major Nigerian languages (Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba). In universities, English is the language of instruction, with some teaching and research in other languages. Common criticisms of the policy are that the transition from the mother tongue to English is not well articulated and that pupils are made to learn too many languages too quickly. However, in practice, the multilingual approach is found advantageous. Problems affecting implementation of the policy include: the large number of languages included; ineffectual supporting policies and practices; difficulty in maintaining teachers; inadequate facilities; curricula that do not reflect the difference between first and second language teaching; inadequate instructional materials; and negative public sentiment. However, government commitment and current development of materials are seen as promising signs. Foreign technical assistance is recommended. (MSE)

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Implementing the National Language Policy in Nigerian Schools: Problems and Prospects. *

Aliyu Mohammed & Rabiu Zarruk

Nigeria is a multilingual and multi-cultural country. It is not surprising, therefore, that here, as in several other nations of the world, the National Question, the question of how to build a nation out of several disparate elements, should focus particularly on the place and role of language in the national development process. This has been a burning issue in Nigeria for many years, with various governments/regimes failing or refusing to take any definite action to resolve it. Recently, however, the Federal Government decided to go ahead to effectively implement the language component of the new National Policy on Education (NPE) as part of its commitment to build a progressive and united country. Our aim in this study is to show that even though the government's new attitude is a welcome development, there are still a number of problems that must be addressed and that solutions to them will require new approaches and the necessary mobilization of new or additional resources including international collaboration between scholars and agencies interested in this field.

The national language policy

The issue of a lingua franca for Nigeria has not yet been resolved, but there is general consensus among educators, linguists, and politicians that a national language should evolve through the educational process rather than be imposed. This view is what informs the language provisions of the NPE, adopted in 1977 and revised in 1981. In this policy, education is viewed as an instrument of national development and progress. Philosophically, it seeks to transform the individual into 'a sound and effective citizen' and to provide 'equal educational opportunities for all citizens of the nation at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels, both inside and outside the formal school system' Pedagogically, its aims and objectives are concerned with: (a.) inculcating national consciousness and national unity among the students, (b.) inculcating the right type of values and attitudes for the survival of the individual and the Nigerian society, c. the training of the mind in the understanding of the world around, and d. the acquisition of appropriate skills, abilities, and competencies, both mental and physical as equipment for the individual to live in and contribute to the development of his or her society.

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It is clear that language is crucial to the achievement of all these. The National Language Policy (NLP) is thus a vital component of the NPE. It is given recognition not only as a medium of instruction, but as a means of inter-ethnic communication and preserving the peoples' culture - hence it's enshrinement in the new *Nigerian Constitution* (1989).

Strategies of implementation

It is prescribed in the NPE that the mother-tongue (MT) or the language of the immediate community (LIC) be the medium of instruction at both pre-primary and primary levels, with English taking over as the medium of instruction half-way through primary education; that at the *secondary* levels, English will remain the medium of instruction, but 'in the interest of national unity' each Nigerian school child will, in addition, be required to learn one of the three major languages of Nigeria other than his own mother-tongue, namely, Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba. In short, language teaching in the new 6-3-3-4 system is structured hierarchically as follows:

	School	Grade	Medium of instruction
(i).	Pre-primary	-	MT or LIC only
(ii)	Primary	1-3	MT/LIC (English as a subject)
(iii)	Primary	4-6	English (MT/LIC continues as subject)
(iv)	Jnr. Secondary	1-3	English (+one major Nigerian language) NL_2
(v)	Sur. Secondary	1-3	English (+one major Nigerian language) NL_2
(vi)	Universities	4 yrs	English (+teaching and research in Nigerian and other languages

Justification

This structure is not very different from what used to obtain in pre-independence years in many Nigerian schools. It became necessary to reaffirm it, however, because some Nigerian educationists and other influential interest groups had succeeded in persuading former administrations in the early 70s to adopt the so called 'Straight-for-English' approach supposedly to escape from the complexities of the school children's linguistic background. As it turned out, however, this did not yield any positive results, so it had to be abandoned (see Mohammed, 1976; 1989). Two complaints are frequently made by opponents of the new language policy:

(1). That the transition from MT to English medium has not been properly worked out and may pose serious psychological problems to the pupils; and (2). That pupils are made to learn too many languages within a short time (MT/LIC + English + a major NL other than the child's own).

These, indeed, appear serious problems theoretically, but practically they are not. Multilingualism, or better, functional plurilingualism, is not uncommon among many Nigerians. In fact, the need to learn and use several languages, 'major' or 'minor' is a fact of life for many Nigerians, as it is a necessary condition for survival, and social progress. In many cases, children have been found to be functionally plurilingual even before they start formal schooling because of mixed marriages in the urban areas, like many of their parents. There is no reason, therefore, why such children should have any serious difficulty in learning to switch from their home language to another language, like English, and vice versa when the need arises. In support of this position, one may mention the Ife 6 - year Primary School Experiment which has proved conclusively that it is not only possible to teach science and mathematics in Yoruba at the primary school level, but also that the problem of switching to English medium of instruction in the final primary years and early secondary school is not insurmountable (Fafunwa, 1989). Studies elsewhere have also proved that initial proficiency in one's mother-tongue is a positive factor in developing proficiency in a second language (see Lambert, 1979, for a Canadian case study).

Another argument in favour of the multilingual approach is the high wastage or drop-out rate after both primary and secondary education because of limited school facilities hence the need to expose all the pupils early enough to other languages in order to attain some measure of proficiency in them in pursuance of the national objectives of the NPE enumerated above.

Problems

We are, however, not unaware of some fundamental problems confronting the implementation of the NLP. Some of the problems include the fact that there are many languages to contend with. The primary aim of the NLP is to give each language a chance to develop through usage in the schools, provided teachers and materials are available for that purpose. Now, not only are there shortages in personnel and teaching materials throughout the country, some of the languages also have not been reduced to writing at all. So it is simply not practicable to include all languages in the school curriculum. But through the concerted efforts of their speakers and newly reconstituted Language Development Centre under the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) more progress will, hopefully, be made in this regard.

Another major problem is that even where the general response to a particular language is positive, e.g. Hausa, the frequency of changes in teaching support strategies at state and local government levels, as well as the absence of an *effective* coordinating agency at the national level, has adversely affected progress in the dissemination and popularization of such languages. In this connection, government agencies like the defunct National Educational Research Council (NERC) and its successor the NERDC, which were initially entrusted with the take off of the NLP, have yet to make any serious impact in their assignment.

Also, conditions of service of liberal arts teachers have remained unattractive for years, leading many of them, particularly language specialists, to leave for other more lucrative professions. This has made it difficult to make continuous progress in the teaching of even the major languages. It has also rendered the government's laudable teacher-exchange programme between the states virtually inoperable.

In addition, facilities provided in the teacher training institutions themselves do not reflect the importance of language education under the new NPE. In other words, the sponsors of such schools have yet to realize that language teachers need *special* training and up-to-date equipment and materials just like science teachers. Here, we must commend Federal College of Education (FCE) Abeokuta for its achievements so far in pioneering the production of NL_2 materials in Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba, but this certainly is

not enough if the full aims of the NLP are to be realized within a few years (see FCE Abeokuta *Newsletter*, 1991).

Not only that, more seriously, and from the pedagogical point of view, the syllabus of teacher training institutions have yet to be amended to reflect the distinction between L1 and L2 teaching, especially with respect to the teaching of the major languages for which there is great demand all over the country. This has led proprietors and schools under pressure to organize 'crash programme' for language teachers and even to employ insufficiently trained ones to satisfy the requirements of the NLP.

Then, books and other language teaching materials are in short supply and, therefore, costly. Publishers are still guided more by the profit motive than by adherence to any prescribed standards. Furthermore, the cartel in Nigeria is so tight that prospective authors are discouraged from engaging in any serious academic writing on their own.

Due to ignorance and sometimes parochial sentiments, the goal of education is interpreted narrowly by some people in bread-and-butter terms only. Hence, they tend not to be positively disposed towards NLP generally and to regard the teaching of Nigerian languages in schools to be 'a waste of time. To them, being educated simply means being able to speak English. Such people, though numerically small, do occasionally succeed in deliberately derailing or disorientating the implementation of the NLP, as some of them happen to occupy strategic positions in the government or private sector, like print media gurus and therefore, have a role in its implementation.

Prospects

Despite the problems listed above, the situation is not altogether hopeless. In fact, there is a lot of room for optimism. For instance, government now appears to be really committed to the implementation of the NLP, especially since the appointment of Professor Babs Fafunwa as Federal Minister of Education in 1989 and the current popularity of 'Fafunwaism'. Also, all federal secondary schools are now offering 'WAZOBIA' (i.e. the translation of 'come' in English into Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo in that order), the three major languages as required, and trying to prepare their students for SSS certificate final examinations in the three languages, starting from 1991, to avoid the penalty of not being allowed to register for other subjects.

Then, recent establishment of the National Book Council to produce, procure, and control the quality of books used in the nation's primary schools is another hopeful sign. Many books in various languages are also now being produced locally through public and private efforts e.g. Nupe in Niger, Kanuri in Borno and Ibibio in Akwa Ibom States. In addition, the President's recent announcement at the inauguration of the National Academy of Education that *science, technology,* and *teacher education* are the government's new priorities, is another prospect. The latter does entail language education as stipulated in the NPE. Finally, the progressive development of new approaches and commitment to functional mass literacy in the country, with a view to making all Nigerians literate by the year 2000 with Nigerian languages as the primary instrument is a step in the right direction (see Fafunwa, 1991).

Multilingualism, properly interpreted, is not a disease. On the contrary, the development of functional plurilingualism supplemented by adult mass literacy through indigenous languages are to us the surest means of not only solving communication problems and facilitating understanding among citizens, but also of preserving their culture and languages. The onus for achieving this is, however, not on the government alone, but on the people as well. But with the growing acceptance by Nigerians of their mutual interdependence and the need to take all legitimate measures to promote peace and harmony between them, it is hoped that this would not prove too daunting a problem.

Conclusion

To achieve the desired goals of NLP, more strategic planning and coordination as well as classroom supervision are required as a matter of priority. More money needs to be injected into language education to provide better facilities and incentives for language teachers to enable them to do a good job. Successful policy implementation takes time. Nigeria should learn from the United States that even where you have all the resources available to fully implement a melting-pot philosophy, it does take considerable time and effort to made an official language acceptable to all, even if almost all the citizens speak it for their day to day activities. It is instructive to read in the Indiana news paper *Journal and Courier,* Feb 6, 1991, that only '78% want English as official language' in the United States, according to a Gallup Poll commissioned by US English - a lobbying group. It further states that

'eighteen states have adopted laws making English their official language, while *three* states have adopted 'bilingual or multilingual laws'. It is silent on the position of the remaining 28 states, however.

To expedite or enhance the spread and development of Nigerian languages, some modern technology should be adopted, e.g Computer-Assisted Language Instruction (CALI) as developed by Bob Lawler (1989) As computers are now available in all Federal schools, the adoption of such learner-centered technologies would tremendously alter the learning environments and attitudes to make them more positive and self-actualizing, while at the same time, achieving overall national objectives. Some form of international collaboration would be required for this, particularly for establishing demonstration units of CALI in at least three 'wazobia' zones to test its tremendous potentials for solving some of the problems currently associated with mass illiteracy and early childhood education in Nigeria. We believe this would promote the development and popularization of Nigerian language studies, as well as expose Nigerian linguists and language teachers to new forms of knowledge.

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